



GRANITE SONG

Peter Randall-Page sculpture Chris Chapman photography

GRANITE SONG.

A SYNOPSIS

In 1991, in the west of England, in the county of Devon, sculptor Peter Randall-Page was awarded the commission to produce and install several wayside art works along rural footpaths.

As he had only recently taken up residence in the area he was understandably sensitive about how to proceed, how to plan and execute installations that would resonate not only with the landscape but with its inhabitants. To his credit he was able to do that with style and grace.

The commissioning entity in its wisdom had given a grant to local photographer Chris Chapman to document the process. This led to a book, *Granite Song*, the multifaceted history of the constellation of sculptural installations by Randall-Page in rural Devon.

Granite Song is a beautiful publication, but only 2,000 copies were printed. So we requested and received permission to feature content from the book in these pages.

We take pleasure in being able to share this synopsis of the project(s) with a wider, 'prolithic' audience.

T L

Extract from
DESIRE PATHS
by Marina Warner

The sculptures of Peter Randall-Page, dispersed by him in eloquently selected intervals in the countryside, open up a new story through this ancient custom of treading personal meaning into the earth itself. It's a kind of salvation story, too, though secular. Neither Common Ground nor Peter Randall-Page have any religious affiliations; indeed, in spite of the strong influence of mystical teachings on him (about which I have written elsewhere), the sculptor declares himself unwaveringly agnostic.* The works nevertheless accord with several functions of ritual: they can be experienced individually, but the experience of them accrues, collectively, nourishing the imagination of the community; they speak against despair, promising in their granite and perennial bulk a guarantee of some kind of eternity on this earth, and they train attention on the mysteries of creation, on the possibility of harmony in nature, through exciting the senses, inviting touch and stirring the pleasure of the eye.

Their relationship to time – that promise of eternity – is enfolded within their status as introduced memory. Granite Song, lying on an island in the Teign, and Passage, at the gate standing open at one end of the magnificent ancient beech allée that crowns Whiddon Park, are both carved from granite. Peter Randall-Page has split the boulders to reveal the core, and then inscribed their twin inner facets with a meandering line in mirror image, as if the stone were fossils or agates hiding a secret life inside them. But granite is a rock so ancient it dates before the deposit of fossils: 'It's really primordial', says Peter, 'pure magma'. So the sculptor's intervention reverses the direction of geological time, and puts new life into the ancient heart of the rock, suspending its millennia of inert timelessness and returning it to the present to become a living thing again. It's revived, becoming part of the narrative, occurring in the present time, of the visitor who breaks a path through the bracken to see it. And a new footpath has appeared on the steep hill approaching the beech avenue, where walkers have followed one another's footsteps looking for the Passage that did not exist before.

The settings of the works increase the effect of vitality: the seasons transform them. Cow parsley festoons Granite Song in the summer, and moss is gradually filling the grooves. Peter Randall-Page has retrieved natural – alien – stone from the unstoried past, and given it a particular character, made it individual and part of the human history of that place. In doing this, he continues a tradition very significant on Dartmoor, where so many standing stones, menhirs and dolmens have previously established relationship between an unrelenting terrain and its users and settlers.** In the case of Passage, the split boulder's gargantuan scale (6 tons) makes it a direct descendant of those Cyclopean builders of the ancient British past, at Callanish, at Stonehenge.

In a fine analysis of African art, the critic T.O. Beidelman describes how the visual language of secrecy forms the crucial dynamic in the affect of sacred art. He writes that this language operates in four modes: encoding, obscurity, accumulation and containment.*** The archetypal forms of Peter Randall-Page's work, his preferred biomorphic lexicon, relate his sculpture to ancient tribal art, as he himself readily acknowledges, and the only mode of secrecy that he has not fully adapted is accumulation – though the seriality of his drawings, especially the large Fruiting Bodies, could be said to be a form of accumulation. (Mantras, or the rosary, work through repetition: the resonant variations of those twelve huge drawings reflect liturgical use of recurring rhythms.)

All three other principles of secrecy do however animate Peter Randall-Page's works around Dartmoor: the small Burrow Stone, inset into a shrine-like niche low in a dry-stone wall by a gate beyond Burrow Farm, is unobtrusively placed; the two great halves of the boulder in Passage appear tossed aside, almost inconsequentially, by the gate; Secret Place – the name speaks for itself – has been ensconced by the path, a wayside shrine similar to the earliest works he made for Common Ground, on the Dorset footpath in 1985. The artist feels an evident affinity with things tucked away, lurking almost unseen, waiting to be discovered.

*See essay by Marina Warner in *Peter Randall-Page: Sculpture and Drawings 1977-92* (Leeds, 1992), pp. 9-21.

** See Stephen H. Woods, *Dartmoor Stone* (Exeter, 1988).

*** T.O. Beidelman, 'The Visual Language of Secrecy', in Mary H. Nooter, *Secrecy: African Art that Conceals and Reveals* (New York and Munich, 1993), pp. 49-52.

BURROW STONE 1994

GRANITE
70 X 48 X 39 cm

Located on a public footpath

Waterstone, for all its inconspicuousness, nevertheless punctuates a moment in the landscape; a boggy annoyance to walkers on the path now enshrines wetness, honours the fertile compost of such ferny glades. Similarly, Burrow Stone, stowed safely and discreetly in the wall marks a passage in the land, where pasture, softly terraced by sheep-walks, flows down to meet tumbled woodland on the other side of the gate.

Burrow Stone is carved with a tight meander, raised up like the acroterion on a temple; spirals, volutes, scrolls and the continuous serpentine flow convey time in its potential mode (the snake being a well-known symbol of fertility and renewal),*the same meanders return in Granite Song and Passage. These sinuous lines convey no intelligible meaning, as carved Ogham script or runes might, nor do they stand pictorially for a specific referent, as the fish stands for Jesus in early catacomb painting, or the mirror signifies Venus and mermaids. Yet their linearity makes them seem to resemble writing: these marks, revealed inside the stones, look as if they might be encrypting a message, and so they fulfil the function of encoding in the numinous language of secrecy. The message remains unknown – perhaps unknowable – and the sculptures become all the more affecting because they tantalise sense in this manner. Beidelman points out that secrecy in African art and ritual follows this strategy: the precise scarification of masks, for example, which transforms a face into an icon, does not translate semantically like an alphabet. Its meanings remain concealed because, at the level of ordinary sense, they do not have meaning; in that conjoining of concealment and non-sense lies much of their power, their sacred impact.

**See the marvellous classic of 1914: Theodor Andrea Cook, The Curves of Life (New York, 1979)
—also John Michell, The Earth Spirit: Its Ways, Shrines and Mysteries (London, 1989).*



LITHIKOS GALLERY

right: Boston Flower and Garden Show. Dry stone moongate installation by Maine Stonework LLC—Brian Fairfield with Matt Carter, TJ Mora, Chuck Crary, James Masefield.

below: detail of fireplace by Brian Fairfield





left:

On the island of Malta, the Main Chamber of the Hypogeum of Hal Saflieni or simply '*The Hypogeum*' (from the Greek *hypo* (under) and *gaia* (mother earth)). It consists of several interconnected chambers and dates from 4,000 B.C. to 2,500 B.C.

Note the 'corbelled' roof seemingly upheld by trilithons, all carved from the mother rock in replication of structures built above ground. The acoustics are said to be phenomenal.
photo: ? ?

right:
Main Chamber of one of several pre-Columbian Hypogea in San Andres de Pisimbala (Tierradentro) Valle del Cauca, Columbia
photo: Juan Diego Castillo Ramírez





Dry stone wall(s) with sculpture by
artist/mason/waller David Wilson

We will be featuring David's work
in the next issue of STONEXUS.





*If you know anything about the subjects
of these photos, or know who took them
please contact us with that information.
Thank you.*

X FILES